

## THE METAPHYSICAL CONCEITS AND ANTITHESIS IN “THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK”

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### ABSTRACT

*T. L. Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock is popularly known as a modernist poem with experimental diction, style and versification. This paper analyses metaphysical conceits and antithesis in the title and in its contents. This poem is not a love song or romance any way, but psychoanalytical details of suppressed desires in stream of consciousness form. It is a mock heroic poem, imitating the style of heroic literature in order to satirize an unheroic character of Alfred Prufrock.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Metaphysical Conceit, Antithesis, Monologue, Stream of Consciousness & Metaphor*

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### INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot is better known for his poetry of the modernist movement in poetry. He was a leading figure of this movement. His versatile personality is worth to remember as an American-English poet, playwright, literary critic and editor. His experimental diction, style and versification gave a new life to English poetry. The Waste Land, Four Quartets, and other poems have stood him in the place of the modern metaphysical poet. He had an anti-romantic attitude.

Eliot was born in America but later became a British citizen. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. He studied poetry of Dante, John Webster, John Donne and poetry of the French symbolist Jules Laforgue. He also learnt Sanskrit and then studied Indian philosophy. He had a close relationship with American poet Ezra Pound.

### Metaphysical Conceits and Antithesis in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is important for metaphysical diction and style. Eliot conceived this poem in 1910 at Harvard. It was first published in 1915 in a magazine. Later on it came into book form under the little *Prufrock and Other Poems*. Referential term *Prufrock-Littan* was 'a firm of furniture wholesalers in St. Louis, Missouri.' (Thomas, 1979)

The poem has an epigraph (translated here) in the beginning, taken from Dante's *Inferno*:

*If I thought that I were making*

*Answer to one that might return to view*

*The world, this flame should ever more cease*

*Shaking.*

*But since from this abyss, if I hear true,*

*None ever came alive, I have no fear of infamy, but give thee answer due.* (pp. 61-66)

In *Inferno*, in the eighth trench of the eighth circle of Hell, Dante and Virgil face the counselors of fraud like Ulysses and Guido da Montefeltro. Each of them is wrapped in a huge flame. On meeting Dante, Guido's shade, since it is set forever in its own delusions, imagines that Dante is also a damned soul and prefaces its story with the words, which form the above epigraph.

The title is antithetical because the poet deliberately sets up an antithesis between the romantic suggestions of a Love Song and the prosaic name J. Alfred Prufrock. This dramatic poem is in the Browning's tradition. It has a number of sections, lacking in sequence of events. However, coherence can be felt with the consistency of the feelings expressed. It exemplifies 'Eliot's tutelage to Jules Laforgue in its recourse to the ironical juxtaposition of solemnity and bathos and the free association of ideas.' (Thomas, 1979)

The poem is dedicated to Jean Verdenal. He was a medical student, whom Eliot befriended in Paris. He was killed on the Anglo-French expedition to the Dardanelles early in 1915. This reference is in the lines from Dante, with a clear testimony to the strength of their friendship. Dante is being conducted through the underworld by the spirit of the Roman poet, Virgil, who is recognized by the spirit of another Roman poet, Statius, one of his followers. Statius stoops and tries to grasp Virgil's feet in homage. But Virgil stops him with the reminder that they are both insubstantial shadows. Eliot quotes Statius's answer. 'Now can you understand the quantity of love that warms me towards you, so that I forget our vanity, and treat the shadows like the solid thing'. (Southern, 1981)

The poem has reference to his friendship with Verdenal again. Comparing the richness of Paris as against the cultural deserts of England and America, Eliot writes:

*I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli.*' (Adamson, 1971)

This poem has an influence of Laforgue, the French Symbolist, and of the Metaphysical poets. The influence of Laforgue lies primarily in his awareness of the city, in his use of colloquial idiom and in the amalgamation of levity with seriousness in order to intensify the seriousness. The poet, in fact, wears an ironic mask. The highly sophisticated, but degenerated, Boston society receives an ironic treatment. Prufrock is representative of the urban life. Thesalon life in the Love Song shows the degenerated but fashionable upper class people. It shows frustrations, ennui, and the boredom of life in a big city. The major interest lies in 'what goes on within the mind, rather than in the exterior events, which provoke the mental activity and play of thought and feeling.' (Williamson, 1967)

F. R. Leavis writes, '*The Love Song* marks a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition. It is a revolutionary poem, one of the best specimens of T. S. Eliot's style, diction, technique and versification.' (Tilak, 1983) Eliot exploits three major trends in this poem: symbolism, stream-of-consciousness, and the Metaphysical. Its protagonist is a member of the so-called sophisticated. The title is ironic. From the title, thereaders expect some love-making, but the protagonist, being unheroic, indecisive, and hesitating to the extent of a neurotic, turns to be a fiasco. He can't collect his courage to

approach his ladylove to make proposition to initiate his love. It is beyond his courage to fall in love or seduce a lady. The poem, in fact, depicts the hollowness of contemporary urban life. The protagonist is so fickle-minded that he fails to gather courage even to propose to the girl in question. Chivalry or seduction is beyond his thought. The impotency and the vacuum of contemporary urban life are best portrayed in this poem.

As in interior monologue, this probes deep into the subconscious of the protagonist. Eliot, through this poem, has thrown a flood of light on the spiritual degeneration of man in general. The poem opens abruptly in a colloquial style, which is akin to Metaphysical poetry. Besides, we have some fine examples of metaphysical conceits and symbolism in this poem. The evening is compared with 'the patient etherized on table', which is indicative of the fact that Prufrock, despite being conscious, is very much like a patient that is helpless. He is conscious of nothing. He is helpless, undecided and has no capacity to muster courage to act. Throughout the poem there is a fusion of the metaphysical technique with the French Symbolists. The poem is 'a medley of images, of mixed metaphors, a combination of the grand and the prosaic, the material and the spiritual. (Tilak, 1983)

The poet throws ample light on the spiritual degeneration of the protagonist in particular and urban people in general through an internal debate in the mind of Prufrock interior monologue between the two sides of his personality. In the quiet evening Prufrock wishes to propose to the lady, but he is apprehensive of being questioned. He waits for his lady in a fashionable restaurant. He is fond of day-dreaming and thinks of his lady coming out of her room and talking of Michael Angelo and his association with Renaissance art. The fact is that she knows little or nothing about art. Like the fog moving slowly by, Prufrock is not at all in a hurry. He does not know that there is a gap between the cup and the lip. The boredom of modern life is admirably brought out by the fog-image. Prufrock feels that there will be enough time at his disposal even after finishing toast and tea. He is a coward and consequently he lacks in courage to face his ladylove. He is conscious beyond the measure of his old age, boldness and thin body. He dresses himself like an Edwardian Dandy but to no avail. He is always preoccupied with the deadly questions probably emerging in her mind. He takes one minute to decide, revise and withdraw and switches over to another idea that has the same fate repeatedly.

Prufrock who claims to have 'measured life with a coffee spoon' is a big zero in the matter of sex. He feels that modern life is a farce that lies in giving tea parties in which there is enough of frivolity and flippancy but little sense. His life has been as useless as the butt-ends of smoked cigarettes. He has to ask an important question but he fails to do so when he finds the ladies looking at him with searching eyes. He is familiar to the faces and is fully aware of their tricks and flirtations. He knows every aspect of modern life. He is even familiar with the perfume sprayed on the dresses of the ladies. He is lonely but with a crowd of maddening questions. He is bored with such a life full of triviality and indecision. The evening like 'a patient etherized on a table' is symbolic of the protagonist's own consciousness and the current animal imagery in a measure of his sense of his own helplessness and moral degeneration. He is even afraid of death. He feels that death is ever lying in wait for him. When the awful moment arises, he feels that he is ready for the proposal; but, in fact, he has entirely misunderstood the civility of a lady.

Michelangelo, great Italian sculptor, painter and poet, is referred quite frequently, in order to show the hollowness of the modern world in which we talk without knowing what we are talking about. In the subsequent lines Eliot places considerable emphasis on the phrase 'there will be time' and variants upon it. Time is important for everything and every event. It echoes the words of the preacher in Ecclesiastes:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluckup that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance ... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. (Ecclesiastes III)

This poem has references to the Metaphysical poets and their wits. The wait for the declaration of love reminds us of the beautiful poem by Marvell entitled *To His Coy Mistress*(Marvell, 1919). The poet argues to his coy mistress that there would be time for delay in love only if they had endless time and place and other opportunities for love making. The poet urges his beloved to enjoy love with him urgently and intensely. This reference is very obvious in the Love Song.

Prufrock is like Hamlet without the prefix 'Prince'. There are references of Hamlet. In lines number 73-74 there is a reference of Hamlet who is simulating madness and addresses the old courtier Polonius. There is further reference of the protagonist of the play and its best-known soliloquy: 'To be or not to be' which is echoed at the end of line number 111. Hamlet was given to self-scrutiny and tormented by indecisiveness. Thus, Prufrock's 'sudden exclamation is to cut short the Hamlet-like soliloquy he had just indulged in and to assist his own subordinate, unheroic role in life' (Southern, 1981). Prufrock is like Hamlet in his indecision, introspection and delay. Hamlet's character rises to tragic intensity but Prufrock's character rises to psychological intensity.

Mystery lies in 'You' and 'I'. It is supposed that they are Prufrock's outer and inner selves. The speaker seems to be timid and highly sensitive. Eliot has contrasted the futile social rounds of today with useful agricultural labour described by Hesiod. The contrast is also described by the use of 'visions and revisions'. The possibility of insight suggested by vision is nullified by the calculation of revision. In the preceding line we notice the triviality of the preoccupations of the drawing room. 'I am no prophet' presents the contrast between the passivity and morbid introspection of Prufrock and the fire and passion of the herald of the new dispensation.

Prufrock is from the contemporary sophisticated society. He knows the frivolity and flippancy of the modern world. He is well aware of the life style of the people around and his familiarity with the female counterparts is explicit in the lines below:

And I have known the arms already, unknown them all

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare. (Southern, 1981)

It is symbolic of Prufrock's moral cowardice and degradation that he likens himself to a wriggling spider pinned to the wall:

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a in

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall. (Eliot, 2002)

Prufrock remains in a state of inaction and indecision. He has wept, prayed and fasted to prepare himself for the awful moment; but even all this preparation has failed to give him courage. He is afraid, as if his head, like that of John the Baptist, would be cut and presented to the lady on a plate. However, he is neither a prophet, nor the question that he has to ask has anything to do with prophesy. He is still afraid of death. He finds himself exposed to death if the vital question is put before the lady and this is why he loves to suspend the idea. But, in fact, he does it out of fear. He ponders over the matter too much and excessive thought of an act keeps him hundred miles away from the action. The comparison of the

evening with 'the patient etherized on a table;' is an image, in the manner of a metaphysical conceit, suggesting the mental vacuity of the speaker. Ladies in the salon talk of Michael Angelo, the painter, without knowing much about him. It is only an artistic pretension. Thus the hypocrisy of modern society is ironically treated. The lines form a kind of refrain, and the repetition is an indication of the poet's satiric intent.

In an elaborate metaphysical conceit, the fog is likened to a cat. The inactivity of the fog symbolizes Prufrock's own inactivity and indecision. This is a mingling of the grandiose with the trivial in the manner of Laforgue and the metaphysical poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Prufrock begins grandiloquently, but ends by saying that his life has been passed in taking coffee. The effect is ironical. In this way the triviality of modern city life is brought out. It is nothing but a dull routine of tea parties. It is a fine instance of the use of bathos. The concluding lines symbolize the reality of life which intrudes, upon Prufrock's romantic visions and forces upon him the necessity of making unpleasant decisions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Eliot's intelligence is highly appreciable for all references made in the poem. These allusions are metaphysical wits themselves for his readers. The poem develops the sense of revival of metaphysical poetry in the 20th century and onward. Eliot has a sense of humour throughout in the poem, from the title to the end, with metaphysical conceits and antithesis.

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